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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TRIPOLI 000892

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LY

SUBJECT: YOUNG LIBYANS SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO PRESS FOR CHANGE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Gene A. Cretz, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Tripoli, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As opportunities grow for young Libyans to travel abroad for educational and professional pursuits, the same group is experiencing frustration upon return. With great expectations of using their education and international experience to effect positive change in their country, young, Western-educated Libyans are facing the hard reality that Libya's complex bureaucracy and traditional society are resistant to change and reluctant to allow the younger generation to rise to positions of influence and power. Nevertheless, Embassy contacts suggest that deep changes have taken place in Libyan society since the lifting of international sanctions and express optimism that reform will continue in Libya, although it might be slow. End Summary.

A SOCIETY AFRAID OF CHANGE BUT RELIANT ON PATRONAGE

¶2. (C/NF) A Western-educated young Libyan recently told Pol/Econ Chief that "Libyan society is afraid of change." She complained that the younger generation of Libyans, many of whom have taken advantage of opportunities to travel, study, and work abroad, are met with suspicion when they come back home. "The problem with Libya is that it is very hierarchical," she said, explaining that respect within society and government is merited by age and personal connections rather than experience or ability. She characterized the regime as mistrustful of young people, although in need of the younger generation of Libyans, who have been trained abroad with the skills necessary to manage changes in Libyan society. Instead, the decision-makers in place are mostly academics without the professional experience necessary to make or implement effective policy changes, although they will lean on younger staff members to do the work that they cannot do, particularly when staff members are "well-connected" to the guys at the top. She highlighted the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA), run by Mohammed Layas, as one such organization. Describing Layas as largely a figurehead, she said the real work was being done by a Western-educated young Libyan named Mustafa.

¶3. (C/NF) The contact related her own experience to further illustrate that personal connections, rather than expertise, are fundamental to making progress in the current system. During the last year, she leaned on a family connection both to obtain a job at the Housing and Investment Board (HIB) and to make a change to the Board's operations after discovering a flaw in the system. Using her family's connection to the then-HIB head, she

was able to gain an audience with him and to present an argument for introducing a procedure that would improve the overall operation. Although she is not sure whether the former HIB chief adopted the change because her argument was convincing or as a personal favor, she is confident that her suggestion made a positive impact on the system.

CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM

¶4. (C) Other young Libyan contacts have reported similar experiences upon returning from long absences abroad: shock at the slow pace of reforms and frustration at the resistance they face when attempting to improve an intractable system.

Nevertheless, young Libyans remain optimistic about the future of their society. They describe the changes that have taken place within Libya since the lifting of sanctions as "profound," with more than one contact stating, "I would not have been able to have this conversation with an American a few years ago." Likewise, many young Libyans are pleased about the economic improvements within the country and the increased opportunities for employment at foreign-owned and operated businesses. They are happy that they are able to study English in schools -- an act that was banned throughout the 1980's. And they are grateful that they no longer live in an outcast society.

¶5. (C) Regarding the recent appointment of Saif al-Islam -- who has set himself up as a role-model of sorts for Libyan youth, with his annual youth day conferences and speeches -- young Libyans remain conservative in their judgment. One contact predicts Saif will face the same challenges as other young Libyans and that it will take time for him to build up the authority necessary to make real changes. Although his reform agenda is well-received among Embassy contacts within young Libyan circles, some lament that the people around Saif are starting to reflect the actions of other, corrupt officials, signaling maintenance of the status quo.

¶6. (C) Comment: The very fact that Libya is now sending large numbers of young people abroad reflects a profound change in

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Libyan society and ultimately will create a momentum and constituency for further reform. As illustrated in the example of the Housing and Investment Board, this new generation's ability to effect real change in the near term likely will be tied to their own personal connections to the Old Guard's entrenched elite. This could change in the longer term, as Libya develops a cadre of well-trained technocrats. We will report more on Libya's new study abroad program septel. End comment.

CRETZ